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# Citizens

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REGINALD GIBBONS

*Citizens*

In the shadows of the Chicago mountains, I walk past a very old woman, she's tiny, pushing down the sidewalk in the other direction a grocery-store basket over-filled with her homeless possessions without price, maybe she's

She's the same age as Mother, at the very end, she looks very like Mother, with the same large, startling, intense and made-up eyes, and she stares

And stares at me with autumn clarity, and when I look back at her she is still staring, having stopped and half-turned, but I go on—instead of responding to her and asking, "Auntie?"

And asking who she is, asking whom she recognizes in me, taking that opportunity of a split second to speak to this stranger, but it passes before I have let myself feel

Fully the impulse to speak, the need to speak, I move on, the distance

The gap between us is too great and I don't want to turn around and see if she is still watching me,

Maybe she is, I feel guilty—her existence is knowable but willfully not known by the way people like me live—but this is not an aunt of whom I never knew, nor is it Mother herself as I never knew her,

As I needed to know her, or rather as I needed her to be,

To be knowable to me emotionally,

This is an old woman I don't know who could use twenty dollars and a different life,

A different history

For herself and for everyone,

And for her realness I await no metaphor (they do come when the  
arteries of thought are calmly open),

This is not a split second amazingly full of a conversation that has  
never before been spoken, a discovery to overturn everything,  
finally an exchange of revelations.

~

From somewhere, a family, a village, a neighborhood, comes

The solitary singer, maybe with a guitar, who pauses in her jour-  
ney and sings, or the wayfaring man with a story that began  
somewhere else who stops under a tree and plays a dance on  
his violin, even if no one listens or dances,

Dances or even listens, for there is pain and there is hope—some  
of the pain

Produced impersonally by remote traders in policy, some of the  
pain produced

By an ever tighter knotting of constraints on our inward escape,  
some of the hope

Used against those who hope, postponing their desires and dis-  
placing their attempts to choose onto clothes and stars.

~

After a waitress brings three plates of hot food from which steam  
is rising delicately, a thin woman at a table to one side of

mine in a bar-and-grill says to her two companions, "I only eat dark meat," her voice is apologetic, she wants to be helped—"Actually, I only eat the wings . . ." she says,

"Really, I only eat part of the wings," she's about fifty, and the two men sitting opposite her, each with a glass of beer to wash down the grub, are in their seventies, and in a softer voice she says to the shorter one, "Can I call you Uncle Sid?"

And there seems to be a small party at the back of the room for a new young fireman, who will try to save the uncles who have built the bars-and-grills and the aunts who have waited on the customers, and the customers, too, if they are caught inside the fiercest heat of what is burning us.

~

In a coffee house near me are two imperfect persons in their forties, perhaps from the nearby halfway house, the woman is nodding, almost entirely silent, as the man talks and talks in halfway words, a kind of disabled philosopher giving a disjointed discourse

On beauty, on his fingers, on gaining exactly one pound of body weight last week, on Israel, but as if the woman weren't there,

Does she even know him?—and she nods to him with her upper body in a kind of self-restrained homage of rocking, he's her lost brother, she hopes or believes,

Neither of them has any longer the habit of combing or brushing hair, he half-rises, he leans across the table and kisses her cheek.

~

Because in some village there will yet be a wedding that lasts  
three days,

Because sometimes the solitary singer, maybe with a guitar, pauses  
in her journey and sings, or the wayfaring man who knows a  
world somewhere else stops under a tree and plays a melan-  
choly dance on his violin,

And after picking or threshing all day in Kosovo or Michoacán or  
Mississippi, singing softly together while riding in a tractor-  
cart, the harvesters go back tired to the small town to get a  
beer,

And in Illinois on the open graded earth that will be a road the  
builders walk away from the monstrous machines turned off  
and turn on their own pickups, their radios shout,

And the late-night workers in Chicago restock the shelves or suit  
up in their clown costumes and begin to fry and sell hamburg-  
ers or in their pajamas they strain motionlessly over the report  
that is due, because there is pain and there could still be hope.

~

The city's restless movement never ceases in the streets, everyone  
has things to do, and on the same streets the beggars and  
wanderers and out-of-work and the thinkers and the grieving  
do almost nothing, and in offices people are performing or  
pretending or laughing at a whispered joke, they are laboring  
against a deadline or wasting the clock, and after a manager  
has surveilled the cubicles and returned to his office, their  
hands are still holding pens that must ultimately leave marks  
of anger and desire and calculation.

~

In a class I was teaching at a literacy center, I was talking about some sentences, some lines of a poem, some feelings, and interrupting me a tired woman of about thirty-five began to speak to me urgently, I listened, her face showed the intensity of a struggle within herself,

But what could she do? how could I help her?, she said, if from as early as she could remember, for her whole life, nobody had told her *nothing*?

Nothing. Her strong somehow crooked face, her chipped tooth. Her solitary path to this moment—we all understood that she had come all this way without mother or father.

And an older woman sitting next to her put an arm around her after she had asked the unanswerable questions and together they cried softly.

Softly I said the word that I had learned was her scarred name,

I told her the truth,

Betty, I said, What you have just asked us all, this is what you know, this is what you have in yourself to tell us, to give to us, that we need.